

A Manifesto of Faith - 1993

Following the October 1992 Conference Celebrating the 35th Anniversary of
The 1957 Atlanta Ministers' Manifesto

In 1957, members of the Atlanta Clergy responded in faith to the social and moral issues facing their community. Their statement, the Ministers' Manifesto, was a call for Atlantans to exercise tolerance, compassion, and understanding as they approached the specific issues of desegregation. Today's issues are much broader and our community much more diverse. But in the tradition of the Atlanta clergy in 1957, we continue in the same hope that people of faith might lead the city in reflections and actions which will bring us to full justice for all persons.

We affirm that all humankind, in its magnificent diversity, is created by God. We give thanks for the richness and beauty of this tapestry of individuals and cultures, threads separately fragile, but strong when woven together by the loving hand of God. We seek forgiveness for building barriers of fear, greed, bigotry, and power which tear us apart from each other and from our own spiritual selves.

We call upon all people of faith to remember that the words we use to describe skin color, religious groups, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or physical and mental health are descriptive, and not definitive, of who we are. We are, first and last, God's children - God's handiwork. We are called to know each other as members of one human family, and to see that all our sisters and brothers live with justice, dignity and hope. We affirm that we are called to love, rather than judge, each other.

As an interracial group of male and female clergy and laity from several faiths, we seek to challenge individuals and institutions to examine both private, interpersonal relationships, and public, societal structures so that the cause of justice is furthered. The very diversity that God has created often seems to be the cause of tension, hostility, exploitation and violence. Racism, for example, continues to be a basic determinant of all life factors, from schools and jobs, to housing, healthcare, and criminal justice. Rich and poor are divided as poverty and homelessness continue to undermine the attempts of thousands of our citizens to participate in the promise of the fullness of life. Gay and lesbian members of our community struggle for basic acceptance. Both individual dignity and public life are under attack. Materialism and the preservation of power have become idolatrous. Violence of all kinds is epidemic, and there is little sense of community. In faith, we must respond.

In our response, God is calling us to be partners in the shaping of the Beloved Community. Tending to the needs of all the people, this community rejects all idols, and embraces caring and concern as the source of justice and security. In the hope of the Beloved Community, we share the affirmation that God created all humankind with equal dignity. We share the confession that our religious institu-

tions themselves reflect the separation and injustice which we condemn in society. We share the hope which is ours because we know that hearts and minds, as well as organizations and structures, are subject to change through the power of the Creator God in whose name we act and in whose spirit we examine the following areas of our common life:

We affirm the integrity of religious diversity and acknowledge the reality of a creator God who both transcends and includes this diversity. We confess that humankind has often used religion to separate and oppress by failing to speak and to act with justice. We therefore call upon the faith community to practice tolerance and respect of religious differences, and to seek justice for all persons.

We affirm that God created one human family, diverse in color, culture, and kind. We confess that through the evils of racism, one group of people claims superiority over all other groups, and then exploits those other groups. The system of race was not developed as a way to describe the family of humanity, but rather as a way to limit who has access to power and economic privilege. In the United States, these dynamics of racism are particularly apparent in the relationships between those who call themselves *white* and those of African origin.

To begin this task, we call upon people who claim the name *white* to acknowledge the dynamics of racism, including its derivative benefits, powers, opportunities, and privileges, and to confess their continuing oppression of other people through systems that perpetuate racism.

We further call upon all other peoples of colors to continue to assert their own identity and purpose independent from racist structures.

We finally call upon faith communities to commit to study and understand the system of racism, and to build a new order based not on the system of race, but rather on the dignity of each individual and on the gifts that each cultural heritage has to share with the human family.

We affirm the equality and worth of all persons regardless of gender. Nevertheless, we live in a culture where gender discrimination and sexual harassment continue to plague women in the work place, and where sexual violence is rampant in our streets and in our homes. In addition, our systems of recourse frequently blame women for their own exploitation and victimization.

We call upon communities of faith to recognize the relationship between our tolerance of sexism and the abusive

treatment of women; to work diligently to change the male biases of our culture, including political and legal systems; and to support actively the equitable sharing of power and opportunity so that all persons might live in wholeness and with out fear.

We affirm that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, are created in the image of God. People in the minority of sexual orientation cross all the barriers human-kind establishes. They are of all ethnic backgrounds. They are of both genders. They are found in every economic class, in every nation, city, and village, in every profession, and within every level of physical and mental ability. Yet, in many instances, they must hide their sexual identity or risk rejection by their religious communities. Their acceptance is a test of the faith community's respect for the diversity God has created.

We confess that, for far too long, many religious institutions have said, "We don't know these people. We don't want to know them. We don't want them in our places of worship." This attitude reinforces the evil of homophobia, and contributes to crimes of violence against lesbians and gays. We call upon people of faith to dialogue with sisters and brothers of Atlanta's gay and lesbian faith communities, with reconciling faith communities, and with the city-wide gay and lesbian community, and to lead the way in knowing, respecting, and combatting discrimination against this rainbow of God's people.

We affirm that mental illness is a treatable disease and that mentally ill persons must be accorded the opportunity to be productive members of the community.

We confess that our willingness to close large, state institutions for the mentally ill has not been followed by a willingness to welcome mentally ill persons into our own communities.

We call upon faith communities to help stop the use of stigmatizing language for the mentally ill; to refrain from blaming mentally ill persons for their disease; to work against discrimination in housing and employment; and to provide a nurturing, compassionate, supportive environment for mentally ill persons re-entering the community.

We affirm that degrees of physical ability present unique opportunities for physically challenged persons to exhibit their God-given gifts and talents.

We confess that the most debilitating barrier faced by persons with physical challenges is the unwillingness of others to re-order buildings, structures, and thinking to maximize these gifts and talents.

We call upon faith communities to be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of physically challenged persons; to encourage language that both affirms and celebrates diversity of physical gifts and abilities; and to insure the congregational and civic participation of physically challenged persons to the full extent of their God-given abilities.

We affirm, as a religious community of different faith traditions, that the earth and its fruits are a common gift entrusted to all people together by the source of all life.

We believe that all people on earth have an equal right to the use of the earth's resources sufficient to maintain life, health, and full human development. We confess that we have abused the gift of creation through greed, hoarding, wasting, polluting, and otherwise supporting an economic system that teaches us to want what we do not really need. Many of us have a standard of living which forces others into poverty.

We call upon faith communities to re-affirm that the creation is for all people, to acknowledge our worldwide economic interconnectedness, to recognize that our avarice often pushes us beyond the fragile boundaries of creation, and to resist being defined primarily as consumers.

We affirm that as all people are children of God, we cannot tolerate any discrimination based on ethnic or national origins. We confess that through the evils of ethnic prejudice we have been inhospitable to many immigrant groups seeking to make this country and this city their home. Further, we have blamed certain groups for the ills of the whole of our society and have erected social, economic, and political barriers against specified ethnic groups.

We call upon the faith community to lead society by being hospitable and accepting of all peoples regardless of ethnic or national origin.

We further urge that immigration laws be just and fair to all ethnic groups. And, finally, that all prejudices, as well as all economic, social, and political barriers, be both condemned and removed.

In conclusion, we call on the Creator God to give us the courage to work for justice and to widen our experience so that we can enjoy the marvel and miracle of creation manifest in each of our sisters and brothers. We affirm God's power to transcend our limited understandings and humble efforts. In thanksgiving, we acknowledge God's ability to work through each individual in this day, in this city, and throughout the world to bring us closer to the *Beloved Community*.